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SUBJECT: UNHCR DOUBLES PROGRAMMING AND SUPPORTS RETURNS IN
IRAQ

Classified By: Deputy Chief of Mission Patricia Butenis for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

11. (C) SUMMARY: Assistant UN High Commissioner for Refugees for Operations Judy Cheng-Hopkins briefed the Ambassador October 28 on UNHCR,s new strategy to sharply increase engagement inside Iraq to support returns. Ambassador Crocker encouraged UNHCR to continue direct engagement with the Iraqi Security Forces, as they were the GOI institutions responsible for security and property restitution, the most critical factors determining returns. On criticism from Iraqi officials concerning the resettlement program, the Ambassador encouraged UNHCR to emphasize its efforts to return families and implement projects to help them. Regarding Camp Ashraf, UNHCR opposes any forced return of the residents to Iran, would assist with requests for voluntary return, and is prepared to assist and advise the GOI on implementing its humane treatment assurances. On security arrangements for the UN once SOFA is implemented, the Ambassador said measures would be in place to support UNAMI and the UN agencies and that the GOI would gradually take lead responsibility. Cheng-Hopkins announced that High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres plans to visit Iraq November 25-28. END SUMMARY

12. (C) United Nations Assistant High Commissioner Judy Cheng-Hopkins and UNHCR Middle East-North Africa (MENA) Director Radhouane Nouicer visited Baghdad October 26-28. They met with a range of interlocutors, including Deputy Prime Minister Essawi, Vice President Hashemi, Foreign Minister Zebari, Deputy Interior Minister Adnan Al-Assadi, and Baghdad Operations Commander General Aboud Qanbar. Cheng-Hopkins met separately with Ambassador Crocker and MNF-I Civil Military Operations Director (CJ-9) Brigadier General (Promotable) Perkins October 28. She was accompanied by UNHCR MENA Director Nouicer, and UNHCR Iraq Representative Daniel Endres and Deputy Representative Shoko Shimouzawa. Senior Refugee/IDP Affairs Coordinator and Refcoord participated in the meeting. They met with the Minister of Displacement and Migration in Amman before arriving in Baghdad. Cheng-Hopkins and her delegation departed Iraq immediately after the meetings at the Embassy. We will report on other meetings septel, as we follow up with UNHCR staff.

UNHCR PLANS TO DOUBLE INSIDE IRAQ BUDGET

13. (C) Assistant High Commissioner Cheng-Hopkins briefed Ambassador Crocker on UNHCR,s new strategy to sharply increase engagement inside Iraq to support returns, while continuing assistance to a large population of needy IDPs. While noting that the security situation continues to present challenges, Cheng-Hopkins said that UNHCR had concluded from its successful shelter rehabilitation work in Sadr City, Basra and Mosul this summer that it is indeed possible for its national staff and local NGOs to implement projects in many parts of central and southern Iraq. Given the steady pace of returns) over 85 percent IDPs for now) UNHCR plans to play a leadership role in supporting returns. While total returns represent less than 10 percent of post-Samarra

displacement and refugee returns only a trickle, the only way for UNHCR and other agencies to prepare for a larger return flow is to get capacity on the ground now. As such, UNHCR is planning in 2009 to double the inside Iraq portion of its regional appeal to over \$80 million. It would raise its in-country international staff complement from five to nine and increase its local staff. HCR plans to markedly expand the reach of its Protection Assistance Centers inside of Baghdad to provide legal assistance, help Iraqis access GOI services and address special needs cases. UNHCR would focus on key return neighborhoods, such as Hurriya and Doura, and apply a "package approach" to address individual needs and community services. UNHCR would carry out its mandate for shelter rehabilitation through its implementing partners and would coordinate the work of other UN agencies, such as UNICEF and WHO to address the particular education and social service needs of returnees. Cheng-Hopkins and Nouicer commented that the Ministry of Displacement and Migration (MODM) is ineffective. UNHCR would continue to work with the ministry, but they made clear that their expansion plans do not depend on MODM.

GOI NEEDS UNHCR,S HELP

14. (C) Recalling High Commissioner for Refugees Guterres, commitment to strengthen UNHCR's involvement inside Iraq expressed during his February 2008 visit to Baghdad, the Ambassador welcomed UNHCR's expansion plan, especially the focus on returns. The Ambassador underscored that in addition to implementing assistance, UNHCR has a critical role to play in helping prepare the Iraqi Government to address returns and shape Iraq's approach to the

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international community. Noting that today,s Iraq was far different from Iraq of the Baathist era (1958-2003), he said that the GOI needs much help in building relationships and capacity. To do so, we must understand what Iraq's transition means, both psychologically and physically. While the new GOI holds power, it is navigating amidst the persistent political culture of the past. One practical reality of this is that Iraqis are very sensitive about being told what to do by outsiders. Noting that Cheng-Hopkins had come directly from a meeting with the Baghdad Operations Commander General Abud Qanbar (whom UNHCR had urged not to evict squatters on public property unless the GOI had a definite need for the property), the Ambassador encouraged UNHCR to continue direct engagement with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF), as they are the GOI institutions responsible for security and property restitution, the two conditions that are most critical to returns. The Ambassador commented that this engagement presents an important opportunity within an opportunity. The ISF does not have a depth of experience in protecting the people. This had not been how the previous regime had used the security forces. UNHCR and the other UN actors have an opportunity to help orient the ISF in this positive direction and empower it without creating enmity among the population. At present, ISF are supporting returns well in some areas, such as northwest Baghdad, and less well in others, as in Abu-Ghraib. UNHCR had witnessed positive ISF role in visits to northwest Baghdad, organized by the Second Brigade Combat Team of the 101st Airborne.

ADDRESS GOI CRITICISM OF RESETTLEMENT WITH FOCUS ON RETURN

15. (C) Cheng-Hopkins said she received sharp criticism from some Iraqi officials that UNHCR's third country resettlement program is exacerbating the brain drain from Iraq. (Note: We learned subsequently that it was Vice President Tariq al-Hashemi. End Note.) Cheng-Hopkins said UNHCR's standard response to such concerns is that third country resettlement is available to only a small number of Iraqi refugees and that UNHCR prioritizes resettlement for the most vulnerable and needy of the refugees. She asked the Ambassador for his advice on how to manage this issue with the GOI. The Ambassador replied that UNHCR should emphasize that return is

the principal durable solution UNHCR is working to achieve. This is the case almost everywhere in the world and it is true for Iraq. Ambassador reminded Cheng-Hopkins that the refugee experience Iraqis and others in the region have first and foremost in their minds is that of the Palestinians and UNRWA, which has no return component. He said the equation in the Iraqi consciousness is simple: refugees plus UN equals UNRWA. To counter this, Iraqis need to see UNHCR's positive role. He encouraged UNHCR to emphasize its efforts to return families and implement projects to help them and work with the Iraqi media to publicize this. (Note: In a related development, last week UNHCR Assistant High Commissioner Erica Feller told PRM that UNHCR is conducting a comprehensive review of protection considerations for Iraqis in neighboring countries and that it will soon issue a new advisory on returns. The new advisory would still be "cautionary;" but it would reflect UNHCR's assessment that parts of Iraq are more conducive for safe and voluntary returns than others and would therefore be more nuanced and forward leaning than the current advisory. End note.)

GOI NEEDS UNHCR HELP TO MANAGE MEK

16. (C) The Ambassador expressed appreciation for UNHCR's past work in according refugee status to defectors from Camp Ashraf and in protecting and attempting to facilitate third country resettlement of the former Mujahedin e-Khalq (MeK) refugees. He said that the transition from MNF-I to GOI security control of Ashraf is proceeding somewhat more slowly than expected because the GOI was not ready. He said the GOI needs the help of international organizations such as UNHCR to implement and uphold its humane treatment assurances. Its presence and attention would remind the GOI that the international community is watching. Middle East Director Nouicer laid out UNHCR's longstanding approach to the MeK to General Perkins. There would be no blanket refugee status for the Camp Ashraf residents. UNHCR would consider individual requests for refugee status from individuals as long as they are outside the camp and have renounced the MeK.

Nouicer encouraged the re-establishment of a camp where defectors could go, but he deflected an inquiry about UNHCR's readiness to run it. Nouicer said UNHCR would oppose any forced return of the residents to Iran. However, UNHCR would assist with requests for voluntary return. UNHCR is prepared to assist and advise the GOI on implementing its humane treatment assurances.

UNHCR CONCERNED ABOUT SECURITY ARRANGEMENTS IN 2009

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17. (C) Cheng-Hopkins said that UNHCR had taken the strategic decision to expand in Iraq. The Government of Sweden had funded (\$1.5 million) and is supervising the construction of a 35 room office building in the current UN compound. This would provide space for UNHCR and other agencies to expand. However, she was concerned about security arrangements for the UN once the SOFA is implemented. The Ambassador replied that measures would be in place to support UNAMI and the UN agencies. He said that the international presence benefits the GOI and that the GOI is keen to take on the role of ensuring effective protection. At present there is a transition to Iraqi control and the U.S. is heavily engaged in training and building up ISF capacity. He cited the PRTs in Najaf and Karbala, as models for the future. Since the withdrawal of coalition combat forces from those provinces, both PRTs are located on Iraqi Army bases. U.S. military units provide perimeter security for the PRT and movement support. UNHCR Representative Endres expressed the concern that UNDSS remains a problem and hoped that they would not be locked down once CF ceased providing protection.

HIGH COMMISSIONER TO VISIT IRAQ NOVEMBER 25-28

18. (SBU) Cheng-Hopkins announced that High Commissioner Guterres plans to visit Iraq November 25-28 and that he is

keen to travel around the country, possibly to Najaf, Ramadi, Basra and Mosul. She said that the HC would need support from MNF-I. Both the Ambassador and General Perkins pledged support. Perkins urged UNHCR to get their requirements to MNF-I as soon as possible.

COMMENT

19. (C) We have been nudging UNHCR to expand programming inside Iraq and focus on supporting returns for months and we are pleased to see them commit to this. UNHCR's readiness to engage with the military and MNF-I's strong support have been critical factors in enabling UNHCR to circulate and assess conditions. UNHCR has a realistic view of MODM's limited capacity and is structuring its programming independently of the ministry. As U.S. forces draw down and the GOI increasingly assumes its responsibility for security, there will be need for continued dialogue with UNDSS to ensure that UNAMI and the UN agencies can move.

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